

Alzheimer's Support Group Offers Education, Sharing and Caring



Seen during the monthly New Community Alzheimer's Support Group meeting are, from left, facilitator Betty Lawson, administrator of the New Community Extended Care Center, and group members Hattie and Felix McKoy, Dean Green, Carol Jeffries and Dianne Brown.

Dianne Brown will never forget the day her mother, who was then in her 80's, was asked by her doctor to draw a picture. Within what seemed like seconds of the request, her mother could not even recall the question. When Snowtie Bennett was reminded and finally put pen to paper, Brown says her mother simply froze.

"Until my mother was diagnosed, I had never even heard a discussion about Alzheimer's disease," conceded Brown, 56.

Today, Brown is a member of the Alzheimer's Support Group run by New Community Corporation. Started in 2010, the group meets once a month at the New Community Extended Care Center in Newark, where Snowtie Bennett, who just turned 92, is now a resident. Betty Lawson, the center administrator, is a registered nurse and certified Alzheimer's and dementia professional

who runs the support group.

Lawson explains that Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia and is a disorder that results in the loss of brain cells. Unlike other forms of dementia, such as that resulting from trauma or reaction to medications, Alzheimer's is not reversible. Warning signs include memory loss, difficulty doing familiar tasks, problems with talking or writing and confusion about time and place.

"There is a lot of fear about the disease, especially in the African-American community," Lawson said. "People would rather pass it off as just 'old age,' but a lot more education is needed."

According to the Alzheimer's Association, blacks may be at greater risk for developing Alzheimer's because of their high incidence of conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes and high cholesterol.

Dignity

"Dignity does not float down from heaven, it cannot be purchased nor manufactured. It is a reward reserved for those who labor with diligence."

Bill Hybels

"The kind of beauty I want most is the hard-to-get kind that comes from within – strength, courage and dignity."

Ruby Dee

"A people must have dignity and identity."

Andrew Goodman

"More than anything, I think as our country matures, we recognize that women deserve to be treated with respect and dignity."

Barbara Boxer

"Dignity consists not in possessing honors, But in the consciousness that we deserve them."

Aristotle

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Alzheimer's Support Group....cont'd

At the support group, members find help and reassurance in being able to share their experiences with others and listen to others share tips on caring for someone—usually a loved one—with the disease. Caregiving can be challenging due to factors such as changes in personality or behavior. Sadly, other family members cannot always be counted on to pitch in and help either.

"I think it's human nature. When you start getting old, people don't want to be bothered with you," said Felix McKoy, 76, whose sister was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2008 and is a resident at the New Community Extended Care Center. He attends the group meetings with his wife, Hattie, 65, whose own mother also had Alzheimer's disease and died four years after her diagnosis.

"I was amazed at how fast the disease has progressed in my sister-in-law," said McKoy.

Even caregivers whose loved ones have passed on still find themselves drawn to the New Community support group, which has about 11 total members, although attendance varies from month to month.

"The support group helped me a lot," said Carol Jeffries, 54, who was caregiver to her mother, who died in May of 2011. "You can feel so isolated... I have become so much more aware."

Dean Green, 58, also continues to attend the group. He took care of his aunt for four years while she suffered with Alzheimer's. While he described a once active woman who loved to frequent local shopping malls, he said the disease took an awful toll on her and left her "weaker and weaker."

"She didn't want to go into a nursing home," he said.

Green learned about the support group while reading the local newspaper and said he found the meetings to be quite helpful in his role as caregiver.

"You learn a lot and even now I am able to give others tips," he said.



Dianne Brown, right, visiting with her mother, Snowtie Bennett, at the New Community Extended Care Center in Newark, which runs an Alzheimer's Support Group for caregivers.

LARGEST NURSING CLASS IN NCC HISTORY



The New Community School of Practical Nursing had a total of 144 men and women, the largest number ever, participate in its Pinning and Capping Ceremony in April marking the completion of studies. During the ceremony held at St. Rose of Lima Church in Newark, the students received their nursing pins and the females were also fitted with the traditional, white nursing cap. Most will go on to work at nursing homes, hospitals and in other health care settings.

At 50, Newark Man Proves It's Never Too Late When It Comes To Learning



Leonardo Pearson, left, is congratulated by De'Borah Stewart, a counselor and instructor with New Community's Gateway to Work Program, after passing his GED exam with flying colors.

For three whole days, Leonardo Pearson could not bring himself to look at the scores on the first portion of his GED test.

"I was nervous, not knowing, but I just would not look," said Pearson, who took the test over a two-day period in May.

Finally, he turned to De'Borah Stewart, his instructor at New Community's Workforce Development Center, Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Literacy Education Adult Programs (LEAP). Both fall under the umbrella of the Gateway to Work program, which helps prepare welfare recipients for employment by raising their educational level. Stewart taught Pearson's GED-Prep class at New Community and was extremely confident he had done well on the GED exam.

"Everything I would give him to do, he would start out slow, but he always ended up getting high scores," she said. "Once he started, I just wouldn't let him stop."

On the social studies, science and reading portions of the test, Pearson scored over 100 more points than he needed for a passing grade. He also handily passed the mathematics and language arts sections.

Obtaining his high school equivalency diploma, or GED, is something that Pearson has dreamed of for a very long time. Born in Morganton, NC, Pearson was the youngest of seven children born to a single mother. The family moved to Orange when he was seven. Determined to make a better life for her children, his mother went back to school and earned her GED when she was in her 30s. She also studied business then worked as a credit collections agent for 30

years before retiring.

"If an old lady like me can do it, he can too," said Sophia Pearson, now 74, who has since returned to her native North Carolina. "I'm so ecstatic with him getting his high school diploma. I want him to go on to college too."

Looking back, Pearson admits he got involved with the wrong crowd during his days at Orange High School and ended up dropping out. He then enlisted in the U.S. Army at age 17.

"I could sense that if I didn't do something I would be dead or in jail," he said.

After leaving the military with an honorable discharge after 14 months, Pearson held various jobs, but the fact that he had not earned his high school diploma continued to haunt him. He found himself unemployed in 2007 and despite many attempts and sending out dozens of resumes, he was unable to find work. He moved in with a sister and was forced to collect welfare to support himself. When welfare officials sent him to the New Community program, he didn't know what to expect, but was ready to kick things into high gear.

"I didn't have time to sit around and procrastinate and throw years away," said Pearson, who is single and has no children.

For five months starting back in January, he attended classes from Monday through Friday at the Workforce Development Center at 201 Bergen Street in Newark.

Pearson said from the very beginning of the class, De'Borah Stewart was determined not to let him fail. He witnessed a passion in her that was lacking in instructors from other programs, which really helped motivate him. He doesn't plan to stop at his GED and at the time of this writing was enrolling at Essex County College in Newark.

"I want to get out of this (welfare) system and take it to another level," said Pearson, who loves science and is thinking about becoming a science teacher. "I want to use my mind power to make that happen."

AUTO AND CULINARY GRADUATES CLASS OF APRIL 2012





His specialty may be computers, but Ramon "Ray" Gerena views his job at New Community as being in lock step with the organization's mission of serving others.

"I enjoy coming to work every morning," said Gerena, 45, who manages the Information Technology Department for New Community. "When I started here, I knew I could make a difference in many areas and made up my mind that I would apply myself and always seek to be part of the solution."

Call it ministry, as Gerena sought the Lord's will for his life at the ripe age of 14, studying theology at a local bible institute in Newark and graduating four years later with a diploma. He was ordained into the ministry in 1999, which is also the same year he started work at New Community. At 33 years old, Gerena became pastor of a church, Newark Miracle Temple, a position he held for a decade before stepping down three years ago to devote more time to his family.

"There is a great need out there," said the Puerto Rican native. "I enjoy street preaching and teaching."

Gerena says his interest in computers started when he was 18-years-old. He was working a night security job at a Jersey City office building. The techs would talk to him and he remembers peppering them with questions about their profession.

"I somehow knew I would wind up in the field," he said. "I always was inclined to learn about computers and how they operate."

Gerena went on to attend a computer trade school in Nutley, where he studied the inner workings of computers for 18 months before graduating from the program. He then married his wife, Marisol, and the couple has three boys, who today are 17, 19 and 21.

At New Community, Gerena has been a great asset, upgrading not only the computer system, but telephone system to achieve cost savings and help bring New Community technologically

up to date. He also takes pleasure in troubleshooting computer problems for NCC employees.

"He is deeply committed to the mission of New Community and always strives to lend a helping hand wherever he is needed," said Joseph Matara, NCC's Chief Operating Officer. "Ray is very patient and takes time to teach his clients as he resolves their issues. He takes his work seriously. He simply is a pleasure to work with."

Upgrade of the phone systems at New Community has not only resulted in better quality service, but Gerena expects the cost-savings to total some \$200,000 over the next three years.

"This is fiber cutting edge technology," he said, adding that computers are also being upgraded to make them faster and more efficient.

Anna Sing-King, New Community's Manager of Human Resources, is one of those individuals who has come to greatly rely on the services of Ray Gerena.

"I have Ray on speed dial," she explained. "If I need Ray after the regular work hours of 9-5 with any issues related to our automated payroll system, Ray picks up the phone and assists me. If I need Ray to respond quickly to a computer click, he is there. If I ask a simple question about why my computer automatically shut down, he responds with a gentle eloquence, 'I will be there in a second.'"

While many let out a sigh of relief once Gerena has successfully solved their problem, he sees it as just another day to go home feeling fulfilled because he has helped bring a smile to someone's face.

"I just enjoy serving people," he said. "It is better to give than to receive."

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